

18 Kaarle Nordenstreng

Policy for News Transmission

Kaarle Nordenstreng, 'Policy for news transmission', paper presented in the general assembly of the International Association for Mass Communication Research, Konstanz, Germany, 1970. Reprinted in *Educational Broadcasting Review*, Autumn 1971.

Just a few years ago discussions around television and mass communications in general were dominated by the medium's technical characteristics and the journalist's daily problems in taking advantage of them. A typical example of such debates centered on the role of television in demonstrations – whether or not the TV camera has a stimulating effect on the happening itself. Now it seems that the governing theme in the debate is the role of the media as communications institutions of the greatest social and political importance. For instance, television is today – after Spiro Agnew has spoken – viewed more as an institution operating within the framework of other institutions; the level of discussion begins to be sociological and political rather than psychological and practical.

I see this as a significant indication of the direction taken by the debate and research around the mass media in general: the emphasis is shifting from practical journalistic problems to general societal problems. Of course this does not – and should not – mean neglecting practical considerations; it only means that the societal considerations so far largely neglected will be given proper attention.

The central issue in the present debate around the mass media, according to my diagnosis, is whether a mass medium should act as a mirror reflecting the community, the society and the world as a whole, or whether it should take an active part in changing them. The prevalent opinion among the media people as well as social scientists, as I perceive it, is that the media should not be used as channels for the active promotion of social change but that they should instead be used as an accurate mirror reflecting events in the world. Accordingly, their relation to the rest of

society should be service-oriented, or to use an illuminating term 'parasitic'.¹

I disagree with this concept of mass communication as a passive mirror, at least with regard to the broadcasting media. My point is that the adoption of a 'parasitic' mirror role does not necessarily make the medium impartial or objective, however carefully it covers everything that happens around – it only makes it impartial and objective in relation to those whose actions have been covered ('those' being persons, institutions, etc.). Reporting what happens – and only that – does not guarantee accurate coverage of the world. The event must be 'placed in perspective', as the function of background commentaries and current affairs programs is usually expressed.

It is not difficult to see how little of passive reflection is present in commentary programs and how much of an active element they unavoidably contain. No doubt it is these programs of 'perspective' that have recently raised pressures against the networks all over the world: the tendency of broadcasters to give as complete a picture of the world as possible has not appealed to everybody. Those who have become used to being 'objectively' covered by the mirror media are now annoyed by being presented 'in perspective', which is likely to be perceived as 'biased' however balanced it may be.

This anger is an indirect indication of the fact that a mirror medium tends to support the *status quo*, i.e. that it is likely to be partial to those interests which dominate the prevailing 'balance of power' in society. Or to use a term introduced by Antonio Gramsci, the mirror practice works in favor of the material and mental *hegemony* in society.²

What we are faced with here is not only the problem of the

1. I pass here the vital problem concerning the character and control of a service medium: should it reflect a monolithic majority point of view or should it follow a model of parliamentarism by sharing the contents according to relative size of various audience subgroups, etc.

2. Unfortunately these statements, purely empiric by their nature, cannot be documented by solid pieces of empirical research (in a positivistic sense), which in fact is an indication of the inadequacies of the mass communication research tradition (see Nordenstreng, 1968). Some empirical evidence (together with a general description of cultural and political conditions of a society) is included in a paper by Littunen and Nordenstreng (1971).

freedom of the press but also another dilemma: the more comprehensive a picture of the world we want to present in programs to our audience, the less we can function as a plain mirror. In fact, it is the whole principle of journalism and the ultimate aim of broadcasting which is at issue. The traditional concept of journalism as reporting the truth and the idea of mass communication as a non-biased mirror of the community and the whole world simply will not work any longer. Typical of the ambivalence of this new situation is the fact that journalists, while sympathizing with the mirror concept of broadcasting, at the same time firmly react against intimidation of the medium by governmental or other pressure groups.

At this stage there is an urgent need for specifying the role of broadcasting – and the concept of journalism in general. What is needed is not only empirical research into the practical aspects of broadcasting at different stages of the communication process (production, programs, audience) but also theoretical advance toward a *systematic explication of the ultimate goals of activity*, i.e. a careful re-evaluation of policy. This can be carried quite far without any new data, merely by means of systematic discussion and thinking. Such a clarification of meanings and aims does not imply esoteric speculation in an ivory tower far removed from practical problems, for which social scientists have often been criticized by practical workers, and on good grounds. It should also be remembered that a theoretical emphasis by no means rules out the importance of accumulating empirical evidence of the operation in practice.

Finnish broadcasting research has tried to advance systematically at both of these levels, empirical and theoretical. To ensure a balance between them – and especially to make sure that theoretical research into the aims of broadcasting does not lag behind – research has been incorporated with planning activities in a single unit for long-range planning. An example of the kind of work done in the Finnish Broadcasting Company in this field will be given below, in the form of excerpts from a report on the principles of news transmission prepared as part of long-range planning activity.³

3. A closer description of the research organization in the Finnish Broadcasting Company will be found in Nordenstreng (1971).

This news report has been drawn up following an assignment given by the Board of Directors to the Section for Long-Range Planning in September 1969, which says, among other things, the following:

In general, the foundations of news activity should be considered, all the way from the way in which news is chosen to the language used in news broadcasts. Only when the objectives of news activity have thus been made clear can we begin to plan the practical aspects of news and current affairs activity in a meaningful way (increasing the number of editors, expanding the correspondent network, etc.).

The LRP section then set up a special working group to carry out the actual work. The working group consisted of nine persons: five practitioners (the heads of the Finnish and Swedish TV news services, the head of provincial broadcasting, an editorial secretary of the radio news service, and a foreign news editor), two who were both practitioners and researchers (a radio news editor with a degree in the social sciences and experience in audience research, and a former researcher now working in the LRP Section as an expert on program activities), together with two research experts of the LRP Section, Professor Yrjö Ahmavaara and myself (I have also been involved in practical work). The working group was chaired by myself, while one of the practitioner-researchers (the radio news editor, Mr Pekka Pelto) acted as secretary. The group worked for over four months, meeting once a week (except in late November at the beginning of the SALT negotiations) and got a sixty-seven-page report completed in February 1970. The report was unanimous, and both the practitioners and the researchers felt that they had learned a lot in working on it.

The full report is composed of six sections and two lengthy appendices: 'Introduction', 'The objectives of news activity', 'Informational news criteria', 'News acquisition', 'News broadcasts' and 'Suggestions for practical measures', with a survey of research into program comprehension and an analysis of the traditional news criteria as appendices. In the following only parts of the report will be reproduced. Sections omitted include a survey of the history of news transmission, originally part of the introduction, and the sections on news acquisition and broadcasting (describing the present system and suggesting an application

of informational news criteria to the gathering and presenting of news). Also omitted is the section suggesting practical measures for implementation of the new policy into practice. Parts of the appendices have been incorporated in the introduction and in the section on informational news criteria below (in the original report the appendices are elaborated supplements to the introduction).

The report: introduction

The starting point of this report is the recognition of the fact that news diffusion through mass communication is in a worldwide state of crisis. The problems to be faced can be reduced to two main categories: comprehension and news criteria.

Comprehension

It has been shown that news broadcasts are among the most popular programs on the basis of both audience size and appreciation. Over 80 per cent of the Finnish population over fifteen follow at least one news broadcast a day over radio or television. The news is also followed with concentration. Around 90 per cent of listeners and viewers follow the most important news broadcasts with concentration.

Seventy per cent of listeners and viewers rate radio and television news as the most reliable, compared to other news media. About 80 per cent of the adult population is satisfied with the Broadcasting Company's news programs. The figure is about 90 per cent for domestic news and seventy per cent for foreign news.

When we start to measure comprehension of the news, however, the situation is different. Interviews carried out immediately after the news have shown that in general little if anything is remembered of the content of the news. It also appeared that the unsystematic details which are retained are subsequently formed into a whole which may be faulty. Even with some help from the interviewer, 48 per cent of television-news viewers remembered nothing of the content of the news. The questions were easy ones: e.g. 'Who are fighting in the Near East?' (38 per cent knew the answer, most of them probably knew it before). The study, in fact, concluded that 'the main thing retained from the news is that nothing special has happened'.

This telephone interview study is also supported by other interviews carried out by the LRP section. The concluding estimate in these is that news concerning general issues (which forms the basis of news material) offers essential information to only about 10-15 per cent of the audience.

This is in agreement with the observation that for many Finns, following the news is a mere ritual, a way of dividing up the daily rhythm, and a manifestation of alienation. According to a report,

Many people follow the news because in this way they gain a point of contact with the outside world – a fixed point in life – while the content of the news is indifferent to them.

Accordingly, despite widespread interest in the news and close attention to news events among the public, it is frequently questionable whether the content of the news has been understood. This is so especially in the case of the public at large, which usually lacks the informational background necessary to a comprehension of the abstract concepts involved in the news. In such a situation, news programs do not fulfil their function, which is the transmission of information; they begin to serve a completely different purpose, whereby the following of news broadcasts becomes a ritual, a custom serving to maintain a feeling of security.

Large audiences and interest or confidence in the news thus do not necessarily testify to successful news activity. The final criterion must be comprehension, i.e. the question whether news programs enable the audience to form a truthful picture of the events described. It should especially be noted that in the case of radio and television, as mass media with an exceptionally wide distribution, comprehension should be examined in all population groups, rather than, for example, only from the point of view of the elite. Only a stream of information which penetrates the entire society can serve to advance the democratization which has been set as one of the basic goals of the program activity of the Finnish Broadcasting Company.

Four main factors have been identified in research as important for comprehension of the news message: interest (in so far as it affects the decision to follow the news), concreteness, identification and linguistic factors (including the TV picture).

But although taking these factors into consideration is of great help, even their most skillful application will not solve all problems. There will still be important issues, about which news does not reach a majority of the people. Here we come to the effects of alienation. Several Finnish researchers have independently come to the conclusion that alienation is an important obstacle to comprehension of the news message. Tiïhonen:

We observe that those who use television as their main news medium are passive individuals with little education, who lack motivational stimulation.

Pietilä:

Not many read the newspaper in order to find out what has really happened and in order to organize and control their view of the world on the basis of this information; more often it is in order to feel that they belong to something, whether this be a restricted environment or the whole world. This need for contact is very close to the concept of alienation. Without doubt those who in one way or another feel themselves to be isolated from their social environment and whose normal contacts are weak or unsatisfactory often seek a substitute for these in the mass media. . . . Alienation also includes the experience that the world cannot be controlled. According to Morris Seeman, the individual's state of alienation is indicated by the fact that he feels unable to control and organize his world – it feels uncertain – a world in which anything can happen for any reason and without any single individual being able to do anything about it. . . . This uncertainty can be resolved by withdrawing from the sphere of information which demonstrates this state of affairs to him, i.e. by avoiding the mass media either completely or at least concerning information which would reinforce this state. But there are also alienated individuals who use the mass media even more than normally; for them the content of the news is indifferent, what matters is a fixed point in life. These alienated and high news-consuming individuals were the most disturbed during TV and newspaper strikes.

Both Pietilä and Tiïhonen recommend that in order to improve this situation more background material be included in news broadcasts than at present. Tiïhonen:

The expansion of televised news broadcasts so as to include more interpretative commentary material would thus reach primarily passive viewers. Thus it would seem to make sense to program possible new broadcasts in such a way as to arouse even the most passive viewer.

This would probably be a good step, but this alone is not enough. According to Peltola,

Alienation is largely due to a real lack, for many people, of ways of affecting the social reality surrounding them. This is due in turn to lack of education, low economic status, perhaps also distance from centers of population, and the practical inadequacies of democracy. People have learned that voting alone is not enough to provide political influence, and they lack the experience, the daring and the information to try anything else. Furthermore, the channels of influence in remote areas are few and narrow. The causes of alienation will not disappear until our society is considerably more democratic than is at present the case.

The problem of comprehension, in news as in other messages, has often been seen as a purely linguistic one. According to this point of view, comprehension can be ensured by using easily understood and graphic language. This way of thinking, however, oversimplifies and trivializes the comprehension problem, since it pays no attention to the quality and 'degree of difficulty' of the content of the message as an 'idea whole'. It must be remembered that the simplicity of an idea – for instance of a news item – is not the same thing as the simplicity of the language in which it is described. Language usage must of course receive continual attention in news transmission, but this in itself is not enough; other means are also necessary to ensure comprehension of the message and simultaneously fulfillment of the purpose of news transmission.

News criteria

The other problem in news activity, which has been more in the foreground than comprehension, is the actual definition of news value and thus of news activity as a whole – the criteria by which news items are selected for transmission from the material available. News editing is specifically a process of selection, but the factors which determine this selection have not been very thoroughly examined either by news editors or by mass communication scientists. Thus the criteria applied have been based on the 'eye for news', the 'news instinct' or 'rule of thumb'; mainly unwritten rules, shaped by journalistic tradition, which

have determined the order of importance and manner of presentation of news items.⁴

Now, however, it is becoming apparent everywhere that the old practice is no longer sufficient to guide present-day news transmission. The improvement of national and international communication and the acceleration of technological, economic and social development have placed the mass media in a new situation, in which their task and working criteria must be re-evaluated. This is so especially in the case of television news transmission, which at its birth stepped into the traditions shaped by the press and the radio, but which has turned out to be in many respects more effective than its predecessors. Newsmen are now asking more and more often what to tell and how to tell it. These problems are especially acute in the sphere of publicly controlled broadcasting companies, where attention must be paid to a balanced information diffusion. An ability to make quick decisions and an instinctive 'news eye' are no longer enough; what is needed is an analytic approach to news activity, based on broad information and on rational decisions, along with increasing technical skill.

Although the traditional news criteria do not exist as written rules, we can discover their character by examining how they work in practice. In order to understand their background, however, it is necessary to recall the conditions under which news diffusion had its origin: the history of news activity.

A survey of the history of news diffusion indicates that the news judgements of traditional journalism are based, on the one hand, on commercial factors – the courting of public favor – and, on the other hand, on deference to the conditions defined by the political decision-makers (a group which in practice includes a considerable proportion of the leaders of private business and public administration). This way of thinking measures success by

4. In the Program Activity Regulations of the Broadcasting Company, the term 'news value' is frequently used, but its content is never defined. The way of thinking described above is also followed in textbooks of journalism; e.g. Charnley (1966): '... the experienced newsman has his rules of thumb ...' and '... a fairly good idea of what makes a news ...' (p. 31). In some textbooks, a news item is actually defined according to what a person with such a 'news eye' considers news.

the yardstick of audience size and of the confidence felt in the news by both the public and by the political elite.

The unwritten 'journalistic ethic' resulting from these two main factors has, at its best, nevertheless produced news reports unpalatable either to commercial or to political leaders. The principles of these ethics include: strict adherence to facts, an attempt to bring out concrete social grievances which concern the reader, and a rapidity which serves to evade the censor. A journalist presenting sensitive facts has been able to act with the support of the audience and to lean on the income and prestige provided by a large public. An editor who applied these 'journalistic ethics' in their pure form, however, soon got into difficulties if his reports dug too deep; public popularity was then no longer able to save him from the pressure exerted by strong interest groups. Similar difficulties resulted if his reports, for one reason or another, were not to the public taste.

Demonstrations are in general a theoretically interesting news subject, in the handling of which the criteria discussed above appear with special emphasis. A demonstration is specifically a phenomenon originating outside the power center and it often particularly reflects the demand of a new influence group to make itself heard and obtain political power.

In general, the interests of the political decision-makers have been taken into consideration in two ways. First of all, they have had the use of 'official' information channels, by means of which they can reach the general public. Secondly, they have been offered news in which they themselves are interested. It is obvious that the news information transmitted by radio and television has specifically favored the uppermost social strata. This has been achieved, on the one hand, by selecting items of news which are significant to the decision-makers, but only rarely to the general public. Such 'official news' is represented, for example, by many of the announcements made by the government. Furthermore, the elite group has been unintentionally favored by presenting even news of general interest in concise and abstract language, so that a broad foundation of general information has been necessary for their comprehension (for instance 'official news' is of this nature). The man in the street has had to content himself with 'human interest' stories, which have not been of much practical

use to him. Recent development, however, has been away from this situation toward greater consideration of the needs of the general public. These needs, however, have not been sufficiently taken into account in the manner of presentation; news presentation is 'institution-centered' rather than 'people-centered'. Thus, since the general audience does not comprehend the message, the 'people' are unaware of the details of decision-making. A partial reason for this is that even the news editors themselves, under pressure of routine, are unaware of these details.

The traditional news criteria are unconsciously learned and internalized in the process of practical editing work. This learning occurs on the basis of innumerable hints received from the working environment: the preconceived ideas of colleagues, telephone calls, letters from the public, criticism from influential and prestigious individuals, etc. Open pressure from pressure groups has hardly ever occurred; the criteria have evolved gradually and without remark, and continue to do so as new social forces continue to emerge with new political significance.

Guidelines for change

Underlying the ideas and suggestions contained in this report are two basic principles. The first of these is that news activity should be approached from two different points of view: that of the actual *news events* and the process of selection involved in the reporting of these events; and that of the news broadcast itself, i.e. the *means* which are used in transmitting these events to the audience. The first point of view includes the problem of news criteria, the second that of comprehension. The choice of news is naturally a primary question, linked with the goals of news activity as a whole. The manner of presentation is of secondary importance in so far as it is concerned with the means used in news work. In practice of course these means are often decisive, but we must remember that means always serve some end.

The second basic principle has to do with news criteria and objectives: it says that a distinction should be made between the 'objective' importance or significance of a piece of news, and the subjective interest felt in the news by listeners or viewers. Actual news criteria, by which news is determined, should according to this way of thinking be based primarily on the significance of an

event, rather than on a consideration of *the interest aroused in the general public*. In choosing the means of presenting the news, on the other hand, the point of departure should be based on what is close to the audience and interesting to it. Only in this way can we ensure comprehension of the news. Evidently more background commentary and explanation of the current news is necessary, both in news broadcasts and in program output as a whole, than is the practice today. The purpose of such background material is specifically to link the frequently distant and abstract events reported in the news to the everyday reality of the world of the audience. In any case, the fact that news criteria are based on significance rather than on interest prevents news activity from slipping in the direction of triviality-oriented sensational journalism.

No report can give precise and unambiguous directions which would enable the news editor to make the 'absolutely right' decision. In this case the editor would again turn into an automaton, similar to the one shaped by the traditional news criteria. On the contrary, the news editor should be capable of independent thinking and should be aware as far as possible of the problems of news activity. The aim of this report is to indicate directions, rather than to come up with binding rules or instructions; these are best formulated by those responsible for practical news work.

The objectives of news activity

According to the Program Activity Regulations of the Finnish Broadcasting Company, the main general objective of broadcasting activity is

to offer a view of the world which is based on correct information and on facts, which changes as the world changes and as our knowledge of it increases, changes or becomes more perfect. The Broadcasting Company should not aim at implanting some particular world view in its audience, but rather at making available the building blocks necessary in the construction of a personal world view.

These general guidelines naturally concern all fields of program activity, including the news. The Regulations specifically touch upon news activity as follows: 'An important part of the Broadcasting Company's activity is the transmission of news and coverage of both cultural and social events.'

What distinguishes news activity from other programming is the fact that news programs and background commentaries on the news are concerned with events which have recently occurred or which have recently become of interest.

By a news item we mean a piece of information about an event which has recently occurred or has recently been brought up, which is of significance to the audience according to the news criteria. News criteria will be defined below.

A news item may concern an event which has recently occurred, or it may give information about an event of older date which has recently become of current interest.

In the case of raw news, recentness generally refers to the span of one day. Background commentary may treat events over a longer time-span.

News activity can be divided into two parts: raw news and background commentary. Raw news means the news item as such, without explanation or background. The background commentary goes more deeply into the topics brought up in the raw news.

Raw news

The function of the raw news is to supply the audience with informational raw material. This type of news generally contains short pieces of information about events and matters existing in the real world. The raw news functions more or less as an extension of our senses; it allows us to perceive things which would otherwise not be reached by our eyes, ears or other senses. Such information is necessary to the individual in his attempt to orient himself in the environment. Just as the information received by our senses in everyday life is not necessarily in any particular order, so the stream of information provided by the raw news does not necessarily form a meaningful whole.

For practical reasons it is useful to distinguish between concrete and abstract raw news. Concrete raw news does not include any difficult concept of a general nature which would have to be separately explained. Abstract news contains either one or more general concepts (e.g. 'family pension'), which the listeners cannot be assumed to understand without a special background commentary. But both concrete and abstract news items refer to

some real event or sequence of events which has occurred uniquely at some point in space and in time. (Such an event or sequence of events is often called a singular phenomenon.) For example, a concrete news item may describe the fact that at a certain shipyard on a certain day a new vessel was launched, with such and such properties, which was given such and such a name. An abstract news item will be concerned, for instance, with the fact that on a particular day the cabinet of state presented a bill in parliament for the revision of the family pension plan.

Background commentary

The purpose of the background commentary is to analyse and organize the raw news material so as to make it readily comprehensible. Thus the commentary will explain the general concepts occurring in the raw news (e.g. family pension), so that their content becomes familiar, and will provide general background information. Commentary does not mean commitment to a particular point of view or side in an issue. Such commitment implies support for particular norms, which is not the function of background news commentary.

Thus the background commentary is based on that point in the program activity regulations, according to which the purpose of broadcasting is to offer a view of the world changes, without trying to implant any particular world view. This can briefly be called *intellectual activation*. Intellectual activation means arousing the individual to thinking about reality, about the world in which he lives. The aim is to mobilize the individual's thinking, so that he is able to construct his world picture on the basis of the factual information supplied to him every day; to prevent him from becoming ossified and rigid while the world around him is changing and our knowledge of it increasing. If we call the raw news material 'an extension of the senses', then background commentary can be compared to a switch which 'turns on' mental activity.

The background commentary must provide information which is important from the point of view of the individual's picture of the world, i.e. such information must be relevant to his overall conception of reality. The starting point is what the individual himself considers important, and the aim is to help him link the

content of the raw news to his own view of the world. Information which activates the individual intellectually provides evidence of facts which the individual has ignored in his previous beliefs concerning reality, beliefs which are often called prejudices or stereotypes. If the individual receives information about a fact which does not fit in with his stereotyped, preconceived ideas, intellectual activation is possible and the result will probably be a more realistic stereotype. Thus news activity is intellectually activating with regard to the audience as a whole if it provides as much information as possible about such facts as are known to be unfamiliar or ignored among the public.

Service information

Weather, police and betting announcements, together with other such information of general usefulness, do not belong to news activity except in so far as they are possible sources of news items (according to normal news criteria). However, it is often most practical to broadcast such announcements within the framework of the news program. If the news broadcast has enough space, there is probably no particular reason to change the existing practice. It should be noted, however, that the inclusion of these announcements in news programs does not yet make news out of them, so that news criteria cannot be applied to them. The results of sport competitions and event should also be understood as service information.

Informational news criteria

As we have said, the objective of news activity is the transmission of valid information on a current basis, and the intellectual activation which is related to it. News material must be selected and transmitted to the audience according to criteria which enable us to achieve these objectives. By means of these criteria, the value of a given news item can be determined at least with respect to other news, together with the means which will give the best result within the framework of the news material of a given day.

The criteria applied in news activity aiming at these objectives cannot be limited to the transmission of information which is in harmony with some particular ideology or social theory. This

would be a political news criterion. Nor can the news be restricted to what the audience wants to hear; the interest of the audience at a given time is determined by what people are accustomed to (or what has been given them before). This would represent a commercial news criterion. The primary criterion of news selection should be the extent to which the event described presumably affects the life of a large number of people, i.e. the extent of the effect of the event among the audience. In this case, we are applying an informational news criterion.⁵

In his elaborated conceptual analysis, based on the semantic information theory, Ahmavaara gives a logically exact formulation to the general objective of the FBC, as expressed in the Program Activity Regulations, e.g. the construction of a subjective world view and the consequences of an accumulation of new empirical evidence upon it. In this framework information is, by definition, understood as messages which are likely to change the world view of a recipient to one which is more realistic, i.e. more consistent with new evidence about the 'objective true world'. This necessarily leads to an emphasis on facts and opinions 'neglected' in the climate of public opinion, and furthermore to a kind of conflict between the medium and the public – this, after all, is essentially what the idea of opposition to (any kind of) conformism or hegemony implies.

The principle of an informational program policy – or of an informational press theory in general – can also be expressed as in the third part of the Long-Range Planning Report for the FBC:

The deliberate aim of informational broadcasting activity is to avoid the censorship which may follow as a consequence of the inclusion of ideological truths in programs. This does not mean that informational program activity should not include such ideological truths, but only that the *censorship* connected with them should be avoided. This can be achieved by allowing various ideological viewpoints to be brought forth within the framework of program activity as a whole, thus cancelling out the information barriers set by each of them. The principles of informational broadcasting activity are derived from the general concept of information, according to which various world views are seen as alternative hypotheses rather than as ideological truths. Only by

5. The informational news criteria described here are based on Ahmavaara (1969).

following this principle can broadcasting activity offer the public the greatest possible amount of the most accurate possible information, about the world around it. Informational broadcasting activity rests on the assumption of the greatest possible independence of all pressure and interest groups, including the state.

Criteria of news value

1. *The external criterion.* The importance of a news item is determined in the first place by the extent to which the event described influences the life of the listeners and viewers either directly or indirectly, regardless of whether or not the audience is itself aware of this effect.

Thus, for example, the news of negotiations between the ministers of industry of the four largest copper-producing countries in Peru is of considerable value; these four countries are developing countries, which by means of cooperation may be able to free themselves from the tutelage of the industrial nations and reach a stable economic position. Furthermore, copper is of strategic importance; it is therefore possible that the industrial nations will not willingly give up their advantage, and crises will occur the true nature of which will perhaps not be revealed. For all these reasons, the news of the negotiations is important and concerns indirectly also the Finnish public, which, however, cannot be expected to realize the significance of the meeting.

According to this criterion, statistical information which describes in a significant way an occurring process of development may also have news value.

The external criterion should nevertheless not be applied so rigidly that news items providing a general informational background for the audience are eliminated. Such a background is continually necessary, both for domestic and for international news. In this case such events also have news value which perhaps do not concern a Finnish audience even indirectly, but which are part of a general trend of development which is related to various issues and which it is useful to understand.

2. *The criterion of generality.* A news item must have general significance. This means that it must concern as large a part as possible of the audience which is following the news broadcast. According to this criterion, news of an event which affects the

lives of only a few individuals is not particularly valuable. For example, publicizing the names of the people who died when a private house burnt down is not appropriate, unless they happened to be especially prominent individuals.

This criterion should also not be applied so rigidly that it excludes the possibility of transmitting information to minority groups which are especially dependent on the radio news broadcasts for their information; this is particularly the case with the blind.

Reliability, balance, speed

Raw news should be based on the application of these two criteria. In addition, however, the general requirements, applicable to all news activity, those of reliability, balance (neutrality, impartiality) and speed, should also be applied.

Reliability means that individual items of information should be checked whenever possible. In general this can be done with all domestic news. From abroad, however, information is often obtained which is uncertain, in the sense that only the agency supplying the information is responsible for its content. In making such information public the uncertainty involved should always be made clear, not merely by mentioning the initials of the news agency responsible, which are often meaningless to the audience, but in some more explicit manner.

Reliability is closely related to balance in so far as it is often difficult to achieve a reliable picture of an event unless many different points of view are taken into account. Over a period of time a number of different interpretations of an event or issue should be presented, as far as they are available. This places great demands on the editors' ability and on their desire to be as objective as possible. However, since no one individual can be completely objective, even if he makes a sincere effort to be so, many different ways of thinking should be represented on the editorial board. Only this can guarantee balance in the long run.

The most important thing is not to strive toward objectivity in the short run, toward a state of affairs in which every single news item is the Truth. This is not possible. If the partiality, oneness, subjectivity and unreliability of each item of news were to

be accepted as the starting point, it would be possible to assure impartiality in the long run.

It is thus not advisable to seek after the most reliable source of news and the most objective editor. There is no such thing. All possible sources of news ought to be used and the editorial offices should be staffed with editors who differ from each other in as many ways as possible in subjectivity, philosophy of life and partiality. In this way something essential can be reached by means of the rules concerning demands for impartiality, listening to the other side, similar treatment of parties, verification of information and so on.

Speed is an essential part of news activity. It is important that news information be transmitted to the audience without delay. This nevertheless does not mean that speed should be used as an excuse for inaccurate reporting, superficial commentary or outright errors. In particular, there is no need for the FBC to compete with itself in speed, even if it does compete with other news media.

Criteria of background commentary

In the case of background commentary, additional criteria must be applied, which we can call internal criteria. Since the point of departure of the commentary is the raw news, the external and general criteria are taken into consideration indirectly.

The internal news criterion means that the news value of an item is determined by the significance attached to it by the receiver himself. The purpose of the background commentary thus is to explain the content of a news item to the listener in such a way that he comes to perceive its relevance to his own life. This is simultaneously intellectual activation, which is the actual function of the background commentary.

Conclusions

On the basis of the criteria defined above, part of present-day news material should be treated differently. Such material concerns, for example, crimes, accidents, beauty contests, royal weddings and sports. This kind of news rarely has any relevance as such to the life of the audience or to intellectual activation, unless they reach significantly high proportions or unless they are

treated in such a way as to bring out their general significance or lack of it. These news items are also typical of news selected on the basis of traditional (commercial) news criteria, i.e. giving the public what it wants to hear and what it has been made used to wanting.

The use of this kind of material is usually defended by saying that it also gets people to follow more important news. However, there is equal reason to say that the use of such material attracts the interest of the audience away from more important issues to trivialities. Therefore there is reason to exclude these items from news broadcasts. The possible decrease in audience size caused by the elimination of this kind of 'selling' material can be prevented by increasing the interest of more important issues through background commentary. Furthermore, it has been shown that the following of news broadcasts does not depend exclusively on their contents (see studies on alienation and comprehension already noted).

While the news value of crime and accident news and other such material will decrease considerably compared to present practice if informational criteria are applied, this does not mean that such material cannot be used at all. The news value sufficient for publication varies considerably from day to day. Furthermore, we must remember that the news value of an item can be appreciably affected by the way in which it is treated. Thus, for example, an accident report in which attention is drawn primarily to the general causes of accidents and possibilities of eliminating these may contribute significantly to avoidance of accidents in the future.

References

- AHMAVAARA (1969), *Informaaties (Information: A Study in the Logic of Communication)*, Tapiola (in Finland).
CHARNLEY, M. V. (1966), *Reporting*, 2nd edn, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
LITTUNEN, A. A., and NORDENSTRENG, K. (1971), 'Informative communication policy: the Finnish experiment', paper presented at the International Symposium on New Frontiers of Television, Bled, Yugoslavia.
NORDENSTRENG, K. (1968), 'Communication, research in the United States: a critical perspective', *Gazette*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 207-16.
NORDENSTRENG, K. (1971), *Internat. Stud. Broadcasting*, NHK, Tokyo.

United Kingdom £1.00
New Zealand \$3.25
Canada \$4.25

Australia \$3.25
(recommended)

Within a generation technology revolutionized the means of communication in society. The rapid growth of powerful new media has raised questions of content, influence and control that will affect the very fabric of future society. Do mass-communications institutions offer new opportunities for political and social involvement? Or are they simply another means of social control, having the power to impose their cultural assumptions on an unwary public? To what extent does the totality of mass communications' content reflect the culture, values and living ideology of a society?

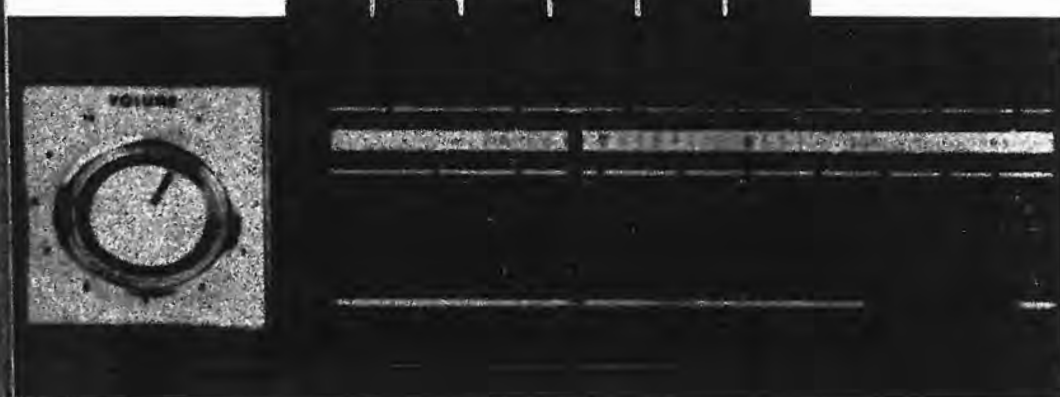
The Readings selected by Denis McQuail for this volume offer some fundamental thinking about the purposes and objectives of mass-media institutions in our society. They include much new and newly-translated work that places emphasis on issues of public policy and concern. They discuss the effects of the media on racial conflict and elections, and assess the composition and needs of different audiences, including children and young people.

Denis McQuail is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Southampton.

PUBLISHED BY PENGUIN EDUCATION COVER DESIGN: OMNIFIC/KEITH WHITEHEAD

PENGUIN MODERN SOCIOLOGY READINGS

SOCIOLOGY OF MASS COMMUNICATIONS



SOCIOLOGY & ANTHROPOLOGY/POLITICAL SCIENCE
0 14 08.0961 9

EDITOR: DENIS McQUAIL



Penguin Education

Sociology of Mass Communications

Edited by Denis McQuail

Penguin Modern Sociology Readings

General Editor

Tom Burns

Advisory Board

Fredrik Barth

Michel Crozier

Ralf Dahrendorf

Erving Goffman

Alvin Gouldner

Eric Hobsbawm

Edmund Leach

David Lockwood

Gianfranco Poggi

Hans Peter Widmaier

Peter Worsley

Sociology of Mass Communications

Selected Readings

Edited by Denis McQuail

Penguin Books

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth,
Middlesex, England
Penguin Books Inc, 7110 Ambassador Road,
Baltimore, Md 21207, USA
Penguin Books Australia Ltd,
Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

First published 1972

This selection copyright © Denis McQuail, 1972

Introduction and notes copyright © Denis McQuail, 1972

Copyright acknowledgement of items in this volume
will be found on page 461

Made and printed in Great Britain by
Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd
Bungay, Suffolk
Set in Monotype Times

This book is sold subject to the condition that
it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent,
re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without
the publisher's prior consent in any form of
binding or cover other than that in which it is
published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed on the
subsequent purchaser

Contents

Introduction 9

Part One

General Perspectives 17

- 1 Dallas W. Smythe (1954)
Some Observations on Communications Theory 19
- 2 George Gerbner (1967)
Mass Media and Human Communication Theory 35

Part Two

Mass Media and Mass Society 59

- 3 Zygmunt Baumann (1966)
A Note on Mass Culture: On Infrastructure 61
- 4 Francesco Alberoni (1962)
*The Powerless 'Elite': Theory and Sociological Research on
the Phenomenon of the Stars* 75
- 5 Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1970)
Constituents of a Theory of the Media 99

Part Three

The Audience of Mass Communications 117

- 6 Franklin Fearing (1947)
Influence of the Movies on Attitudes and Behaviour 119
- 7 Denis McQuail, Jay G. Blumler and J. R. Brown (1972)
The Television Audience: A Revised Perspective 135
- 8 Karl Erik Rosengren and Swen Windahl (1972)
Mass Media Consumption as a Functional Alternative 166

- 9 B. P. Emmett (1972)
The Television and Radio Audience in Britain 195
- 10 V. A. Piramidin (1970)
Evaluative Attitudes Towards the Newspaper 220

Part Four

Mass Communication Organizations 235

- 11 Philip Elliott (1972)
Mass Communication – A Contradiction in Terms? 237
- 12 Jeremy Tunstall (1972)
News Organization Goals and Specialist Newsgathering Journalists 259
- 13 Tom Burns (1964)
Commitment and Career in the BBC 281

Part Five

Structural Analysis of Mass Communications 311

- 14 Olivier Burgelin (1968)
Structural Analysis and Mass Communication 313
- 15 Terry Lovell (1972)
Sociology of Aesthetic Structures and Contextualism 329

Part Six

Issues of Policy or Social Concern 351

- 16 Elihu Katz (1971)
Platforms and Windows: Broadcasting's Role in Election Campaigns 353
- 17 Herbert J. Gans (1969)
The Politics of Culture in America: A Sociological Analysis 372
- 18 Kaarle Nordenstreng (1970)
Policy for News Transmission 386

- 19 Stuart Hood (1972)
The Politics of Television 406

- 20 Paul Hartmann and Charles Husband (1971)
The Mass Media and Racial Conflict 435

Further Reading 456

Acknowledgements 461

Author Index 465

Subject Index 471